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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: CODEL WYDEN'S MARCH 26-28 VISIT TO VENEZUELA

Classified By: Acting Economic Counselor Shawn Flatt
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On his March 26-28 visit to Caracas, Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) discussed the political situation in Venezuela with interlocutors from the political, business, media, and NGO communities. He also conducted internal meetings with Embassy personnel, took a driving tour of a poor neighborhood of Caracas, and attended a reception hosted by the Ambassador in honor of a visiting NASA scientist. In his meetings with Venezuelan interlocutors, Senator Wyden expressed his appreciation for their nuanced views on President Chavez' political staying power, contrasting them with what he characterized as the perception of many Americans that Chavez could remain President for life. Senator Wyden also noted to his interlocutors that the region represented a critical front in the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, one in which U.S. engagement was making and could continue to make a key difference. Electoral NGO Sumate warned that designating Venezuela a state sponsor of terrorism might help Chavez rally his weakening base. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Senator and his party lunched on March 26 with two of Venezuela's leading media figures: Andres Mata, owner and publisher of leading national daily El Universal; and Mario Ceijas, President of the Cable TV Association and President of the Lara state branch of Fedecamaras, Venezuela's leading umbrella business association. Both Mata and Ceijas gave the Senator a tour-de-horizon of the challenges faced by the free media in Venezuela and of the increasingly robust state media apparatus that the Chavez government is constructing to disseminate the Bolivarian message. Beyond media issues, Mata and Ceijas both discussed the challenges faced by the business community in an increasingly difficult environment where BRV animosity toward the private sector is expressed in a myriad of restrictions, bureaucratic obstacles, and direct challenges. The Senator asked Mata and Ceijas what the U.S. could usefully do to support the opposition forces in Venezuela. Their consensus advice was that the U.S. should not confront the BRV directly but rather seek appropriate and elliptical opportunities to make our points publicly.

¶3. (C) DATOS polling firm director Edmond Saade briefed Senator Wyden on polling trends in Venezuela. Saade distinguished between Venezuelans' upbeat national character and their growing disenchantment with the Chavez government. Saade said public confidence in Chavez has dipped to 2002-2003 levels due to crime, food shortages, and problems

with the government's social programs ("missions"). Nevertheless, Saade said many Venezuelans disenchanted with the government generally define themselves as politically neutral and have not, by and large, gravitated toward the opposition. Although Chavez' popularity as a leader has diminished considerably, more Venezuelans identify with him than any other political leader. Young leaders such as Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez are gaining in the polls, but still lag behind Chavez. At the same time, Saade noted that many Venezuelans receive direct benefits from the state and are reluctant to openly criticize the government even to a pollster. He said three auditors from the BRV tax authority SENIAT visited his firm in November 2007, days after he published polling data unfavorable to the government, and continue to review DATOS' books.

LEADING THE "NON-OPPOSITION"

14. (C) Senator Wyden subsequently lunched with Lopez and his International Adviser Isadora Suarez de Zubrillaga. The popular mayor of one of Caracas' five boroughs is by most opinion polls currently the leading candidate for mayor of all Caracas in elections scheduled for November 2008. Lopez is viewed by many Caracas residents, including Chavez supporters, as a good administrator. He discussed the government's administrative ruling that makes him ineligible to run for any political office once his current term expires, the lack of due process in this ruling, and his plans to overcome this hurdle to secure the job as mayor. Lopez said he had little hope that the "Chavez-controlled" Supreme Court would rule in his favor and overturn the administrative ban. He said instead he would rely on political pressure to force Chavez to have the ban removed. Lopez said he is focusing much of his campaign efforts, as he has done for the past couple of years, on walking through the various poorer barrios throughout Caracas and trying to address the problems of their residents. He sees himself more as "an alternative" to Chavismo, rather than someone "in opposition." He added that many of his campaign challenges come from old guard opposition figures rather than Chavez supporters. Lopez also briefed the Senator on his exchanges with mayors within the United States such as Chicago Mayor Daley. The Senator and his staff discussed possible media strategies with Lopez and methods for getting his positive message to audiences in the U.S.

SUMATE'S REQUEST

15. (C) Senator Wyden then held a lengthy discussion with electoral watchdog NGO Sumate's senior leaders Maria Corina Machado, Roberto Abdul, and Ricardo Estevez to review the challenges the NGO faces in its operations. Machado noted that the group's leadership is still under indictment for treason and lesser charges for accepting project funds from the National Endowment for Democracy, but added that the judicial ban on her travel had been lifted. Machado said that the case is inactive at the moment, but could be reactivated whenever the government wanted to put pressure on the organization. She discussed the government's use of SENIAT to harass not only Sumate, but also the individual members of the organization and their family, friends and financial supporters. Abdul discussed the NGO's major ongoing "superwitness" project designed to train and place 80,000 poll watchers and witnesses for the November state and local elections to defend the vote. Sumate also hopes to set up election counting stations to compile the reports of witnesses and gather election results from the opposition parties. When the Senator queried how he could help, Machado and Abdul warned that the expected nationalistic reaction to a USG designation of Venezuela as a State Sponsor of Terrorism (SSOT) would boost Chavez's popularity and provide him with an excuse to enact greater authoritarianism and take additional measures against the opposition. While acknowledging the requirements of U.S. law, they asked that

any possible SSOT sanctions be directed at "individuals, not the whole country."

¶6. (U) CODEL Wyden did not have the opportunity to review this message before departing Venezuela.

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